

ABOUT KANGAS



Kangas are rectangular pieces of cloth printed with a design and a saying. They are usually made of cotton, polyester or a blend. A kanga has a border, called the “pindo,” that is usually different, but complimentary to the rest of the design. The center of the kanga, called the “mji” contains a message or “jina.” You can view a [simple diagram](#) of these different parts on the [Kanga Wikipedia Page](#).

For women in Tanzania, the most important part of the kanga is the jina. These sayings are written in Swahili, always printed in capital letters, and can sometimes be very vague or ambiguous. Sometimes they are traditional Swahili proverbs and sometimes they are simply just messages. Several articles have been written about these sayings and how kangas are used as a vehicle for communication. Please see the [links](#) for further reading. However, the basic idea is that a woman wears a kanga with a message that she wants others (family, friends, neighbors, etc) to read. A very simple example taken from the book, *Kangas: 101 Uses* by Jeannette Hanby and David Boycott is the saying, “USINISUMBUE” which means, “Don’t Bother Me.” Many women receive kangas as gifts. In these circumstances, the giver of the gift can also send a message to the receiver, by choosing sayings on her behalf. Whether the kanga is chosen by a woman herself, or given to her as a gift – the message is not to be ignored. A woman might admire the design of a kanga, but it is the message that matters most.

Kangas can send personal messages and also very public messages, such as the support of a particular political party. I have seen Christmas kangas that wish everyone a happy holiday, Michael Jackson kangas that were worn in his honor right after he died, kangas with the picture of the Tanzanian President, Jakaya M. Kikwete in the center, and of course [Barack Obama kangas](#) that were sold in 2008 right after he won the election. I hope to eventually post pictures of all of these types of kangas.

Kangas are sold in attached pairs called, “doti.” After being purchased, a kanga is usually cut into two separate pieces and hemmed. Then the pieces can be used or

given as a gift. There are at least two types of kangas being sold in Northern Tanzania. One is called “nzito” or “heavy” and the other is called “nyepesi” or “light.” Nzito kanga are thicker and more durable. These kangas are used as wraps, shawls, head wraps, and baby carriers among many other uses. Nyepesi kangas are thinner, not as durable and are used as material to make garments such as skirts and dresses. Kangas of the nyepesi variety are given as gifts without being cut and hemmed, as it is assumed that the woman who receives it will have it tailored to make a garment for herself.

I still have much more to learn about who designs kangas and where they are made. From what I can read on the kangas themselves, some are made in Tanzania and Kenya, while others are made in India. From my limited observations, it seems to me that many of the “kanga nyepesi” come from India.

I have also more to learn about the history of kangas. So far I know that kangas became fashionable on the East African coast during the mid 19th century after women started sewing differently designed kerchiefs together. Eventually, the style was sold as one printed cloth that resembled the kanga of today. The Swahili sayings were added to kangas around the beginning of the 20th century. You can read more about the history of kangas on this [Swahili Language and Culture](#) webpage.

In other regions, especially the Kenyan coast, a kanga is also known as a “leso.” The word kanga (also sometimes spelled khanga) comes from the Swahili word for guinea fowl. The markings of these spotted birds inspired the name for the cloth.



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[KITENGE, KIKOI, SHUKA: A brief description of other East African Textiles](#)



KITENGE, KIKOI, SHUKA: A brief description of other East African Textiles

In a similar fashion to kanga, the women of northern Tanzania also wear another type of textile, kitenge. (Plural in Swahili is vitenge) Vitenge differ from kanga mostly because they have no border and no words. Also, vitenge are made and worn in different parts of Africa, while the kanga is only popular in East Africa. Another difference is that kanga are usually sold in pairs, while vitenge are often sold as three or more pieces.

One example of a kitenge

Kikoi (plural vikoi and also sometimes spelled kikoy) is a colorful, rectangular piece of cotton from the East African coast, with fringes on the two ends. Unlike the kanga or kitenge, it is not common to see them in other areas of

northern Tanzania. When seen around Moshi, they are usually used as a shawl or wrapped around the waist. They are sold as one piece and can be found in many of the tourist shops.

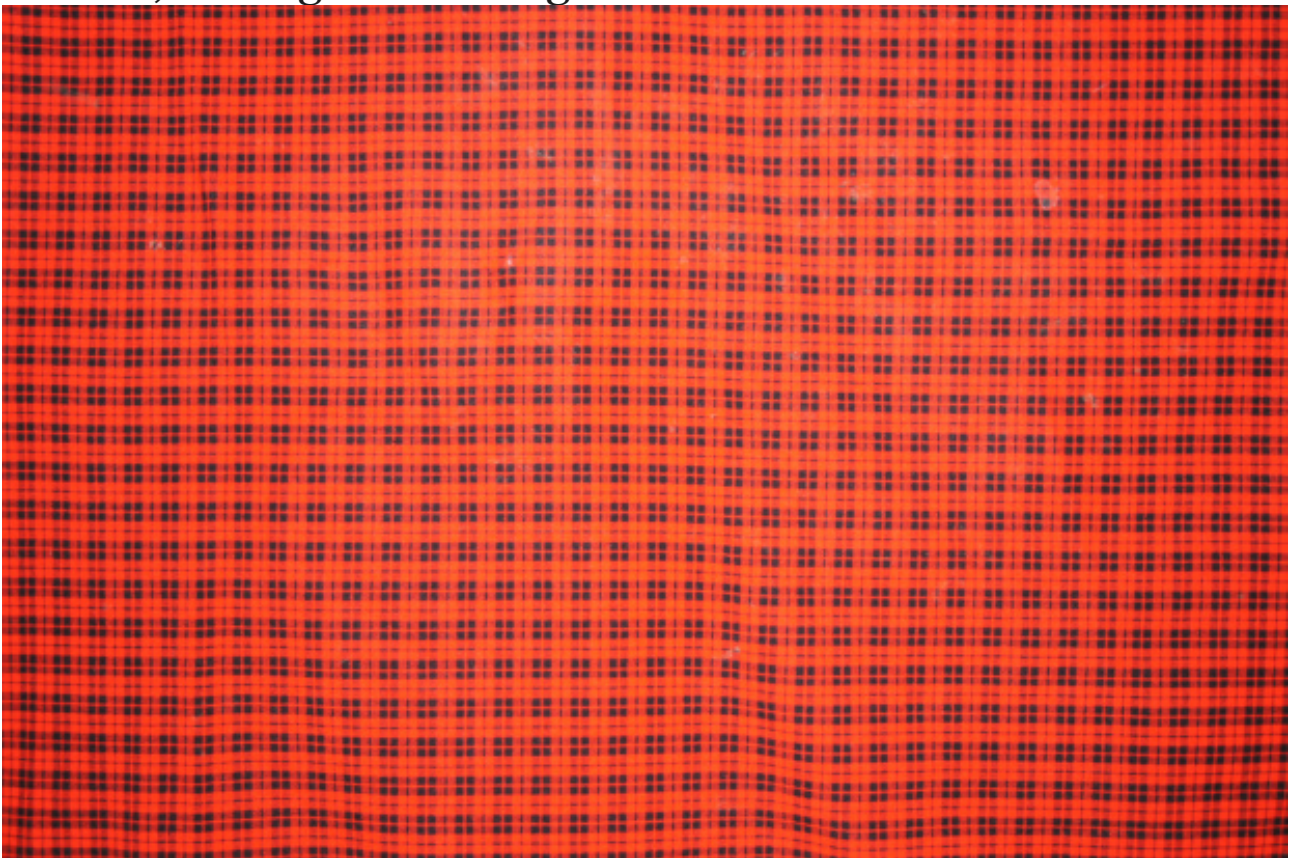


An orange kikoi with the type of stripes commonly seen on kikoi



A less common type of kikoi with a batik style

The Maasai shuka is another type of cloth that is used here in northern Tanzania. They are usually checkered or plaid, although some designs are striped. They are brightly colored, with red being the most popular color. Heavier and thicker than kanga, kitenge or kikoi, they are usually made from acrylic rather than cotton. They Maasai men wear them draped over one shoulder or wrapped around their waists. They are also used as shawls, blankets and table clothes, among other things.



Black and red Maasai shuka

[Is East Africa ready for kitenge Fridays? - BBC News](#)